

3Cs - Cross Cultural Communication Program: Enhancing professional, social and cultural transition for 1st year international student cohorts

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RMIT University's 3Cs Cross Cultural Communication Program is an award winning mentoring program that won the "Best Practice Award" at the National Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (NAGCAS) 2006 Conference and was a finalist at the City of Melbourne Awards 2006. The program aims to enhance the learning experience of international students at RMIT University. 3Cs provides 1st year international students with social and cultural orientation in a small group setting, under the auspices of introducing them to the Australian work environment. Participating students have the opportunity to network with local students, practice their conversational skills, and make new friends. This 'Nuts and Bolts' session will introduce the 3Cs program; consider its objectives and benefits; and encourage discussion on how similar programs might be developed to address the transition needs of international students in other university settings.

This presentation will address core topics set out on the FYHE Conference website:

- Increasing engagement of students with their educational institutions
- Engaging international perspectives
- Breaking down social isolation for new students

Objectives of 'Nuts & Bolts' presentation

- Participants will gain an understanding of the 3Cs Cross Cultural Communication program;
- The 3Cs Program will be presented as a model that could be adapted for use with international students in other university settings;
- Presenters will share their experience of the program and be available to discuss the issues raised in an interactive forum.

Discussion arising from 'Nuts & Bolts' presentation

Opportunities for discussion will be encouraged as presenters invite participants to:

- Identify common issues faced by international students in HE settings.
- Reflect on initiatives they have implemented in the past. Think about what worked, what didn't, and why.
- Consider ways in which the 3Cs concept could be successfully transferred to their own university settings.

3Cs Cross Cultural Communication - Program Overview

Background

The 3Cs Program commenced in semester one, 2006 and was created by Piera Ibrahim, a Career Counsellor at RMIT University. Through her career counselling and discussion with colleagues, Piera observed many common themes amongst international students, in particular: difficulty finding work, understanding Australian culture, and social isolation. Drawing on these themes, she developed the 3Cs Program. The purpose of the program is to assist international students to develop essential professional skills for the Australian workforce, as well as to tackle the problems of social isolation and cultural transition that many international students experience.

Target Group

The program targets all international students but is particularly suitable for 1st year students who are new to Australia and the university. The program mentors are students studying psychology, youth work, disability studies, international studies and international business. These programs were selected because they contain a cross-cultural communication component and because 3Cs offers students a practical application of the theories they are studying.

Program Objectives

The 3Cs Program has a dual focus:

- To assist international students in developing cross-cultural knowledge and conversational skills, in order to apply these in social and professional settings.
- To assist local students that are undertaking courses that have a cross-cultural communication component (Psychology, Youth Work, Disability Studies, International Studies and International Business) in developing their professional understanding of cultural issues when working with international students, in order to foster their professional experience, thus enhancing employability outcomes.

Program Structure

The program is carefully structured over a series of six workshops. Each workshop has a work-related focus, commencing with getting to know other people through behavioural interview techniques and social networking. International students are placed in a small group with approximately seven other students and the mentors for each group lead the students through each workshop. At the conclusion of the workshop series, a lunchtime social event is held to celebrate the students' achievements and present them with a certificate.

Benefits and Outcomes

At the conclusion of the program, international students have:

- Developed their understanding of cultural differences and how these can have an impact in social and work environments.
- Developed more confidence in social and professional settings.
- Improved their communication skills when talking to prospective employers.
- Developed a connection with other international students and mentors.

At the conclusion of the program, mentors will have:

- Developed their cultural awareness/ sensitivity when working with international students.
- Developed their professional understanding of the language barriers and other cultural issues that international students face in Australia, including in the workplace.
- Developed their professional experience, in order to increase their employability.

Recruitment and Promotion

The primary mode of recruitment for mentors is via a targeted email sent to all students studying the designated programs. Academic Program Co-ordinators are also emailed and asked to encourage students to participate in the 3Cs Program. At times, the 3Cs Co-ordinators will go to lectures at the commencement of the academic year / semester to promote the program.

The primary mode of recruitment for international students is via an email sent to all students, explaining the program and forwarding them to the 3Cs website.

With both groups of recruited students, the outcomes and benefits of the program are emphasised. Many students also hear about the program from friends who have previously completed it and talked about how much they enjoyed it.

LEAD accreditation

RMIT University has a commitment to recognising the contribution of student volunteers to the university community. RMIT LEAD is a division of Student Services Group, and provides training and accreditation for volunteer programs.

The 3Cs Program Co-ordinators work in collaboration with RMIT LEAD to ensure mentors receive official acknowledgement of their vital contribution. Student mentors complete 5 hours of training and more than 15 hours of voluntary activity, and receive a certificate signed by the Vice-Chancellor at the end of the academic year. A record of their participation also goes on to their academic transcript for future reference. This form of recognition is an important way of celebrating active citizenship within the RMIT community.

Mentor Training

It is mandatory for mentors to undertake 5 hours of accredited RMIT LEAD training. The training is run by a teacher from the Study & Learning Centre and focuses on: the role of a mentor, dealing with group issues that may arise, developing empathy, accepting responsibility and knowledge about each workshop's content. At the end of the training session, most mentors are confident about their role and inspired to do the best that they can for their students.

Program Evaluation

During the social event, mentors and international students complete corresponding evaluation forms. These forms ask them to rate their enjoyment of the program and the skills they developed throughout the program. It also has open questions that allow the students to provide additional feedback.

The forms are then evaluated by the Co-ordinator of the program and recommendations are taken into consideration for the following program.

Future Directions

From its first semester, the 3Cs has expanded rapidly, commencing originally with 47 students and then increasing, in one semester, to 200 students. Today it continues to grow, with plans to expand the program to all three RMIT University Melbourne campuses. There are also plans to create stage two of the program, so that the students can continue to develop their leadership skills.

More information

For more information on the 3Cs Program, please go to:

www.rmit.edu.au/careers/3csprogram